# Reflection

## DCM170 Researching the future everyday

**Student**
Anna Merl

**Coach**
Dan Lockton

# Technology aka practical arts

"Technology is messy and complex" - Thomas Hughes [1]

Technology was seen as the "application of science to the practical, or useful, arts." [1] Technology is not all about computers and phones but ways of thinking about problems. It brings social sciences, art, engineering and the natural sciences together and these constituencies can help to work on novel creations. I see technology as inherently interwoven in social geography, history and environmental studies. Every "thing" is intertwined with different lived realities, cultures and environments. It has serious influences on the environment, contributing to waste production, needing energy to produce it and the materials that have to be mined to build it. It led us to destruction of the ozone layers, deforestation and a lack of materials [2].

As a designer, I realised throughout this course that despite seeing all these "things gone wrong", we can choose to engage in the trouble and create knowledge for others to build on. In general, I decide to look at the positive side and see how we can create systems and artefacts that matter and are respectful towards earth, different cultures and create a positive impact in someone's life.

I want to focus on understanding the needs and desires of people in order to communicate to others what is really needed. In this course, my group mates and I applied cultural probes and design fiction to trigger people to talk about their desires, fears and needs while looking into the future.

Cultural probes help to understand a culture and people in it before starting to design for/with them. It gives an understanding of the social geography someone lives in, their history and future [3]. This method aligns with what I wanted to learn from this course and gives an opportunity to understand someone's history.

Things can mean many things in this context - systems, processes, tools, electrical and mechanical devices.

## Design fiction

As I am deeply fascinated with ethnography, I was never able to apply it during my studies. During this course, I was grateful to have found the opportunity to apply a "speculative ethnography" method [4].

Depicting a future that is yet to come and to use it as a tool for discussion seemed intimidating at first. But the tools and methods that were presented during the lectures, helped to break down the complexity. The core reading gave a glimpse into how futures can be portrayed and gave us an opportunity to base the research on the presented scenarios by Urry [5]. The scenarios guided us in our journey to find answers to "What would the needs and values of people be like if 12 percent of the Dutch population lived in mobile recreational vehicles (RV)?".

This question is derived from a reflection of Urry's book and our view on the world. We experienced a shortage of homes in Eindhoven, which led to month-long searching for accommodations. We saw that inflation forced more and more people to be dependent on what the government can offer. This meant social housing and house evictions. The problem with social housing is that the residents cannot decide where they are going. They just have to accept what is given to them. In contrast, we saw a rise of people living as digital nomads. Our collective experience with Covid19 led people to rethink their work-life balance. But it is still just a small group of people who live as digital nomads who travel the world and work remotely. As Raven mentioned, we have to depict fictional futures that exist as outliers in our everyday lives [4]. Digital nomads are outliers of society.

These insights led us to design research artefacts that were specifically made to answer our research question.

A learning that I will take with me is that not every prototype has to be built with electronics. In my previous prototypes, I often included an Arduino and LED's because I thought that meant to include technology. But I think that a prototype should be created to make people experience the story I want to tell. It should make a complex idea experienceable. This is why we created a website, letters, visuals and a story behind a complex future scenario.

## Deployment

Recruiting participants can be tricky in a short amount of time. In this research, we had friends and family involved, which can be difficult due to them wanting to help us by telling us what they think we want to hear. To combat this, we applied a role playing technique during the deployments [6]. During the study, it became apparent that some participants did not understand the concept or wanted to be "helpful". For example, one participant was telling us that they would love to participate in the movement. When asked how they would feel if they would receive the letter and had to move, they rejected the idea completely.

Most of the time, the fictive roleplay in combination with the fake recruitment letter, visuals and the preparation website helped to create a mental model of the situation we were trying to communicate. The participants took photos after the interview and we were able to analyse those. We applied the cultural probe method of Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti, which uses cultural probes to understand the cultural background of people [3]. The outcomes of our research could help other designers to create a different, more inclusive and social city. The insights might not be groundbreaking but they show the values of a specific group of people in a specific place.

As I was reflecting on my learnings this year, I came to the conclusion that I am a prototype designer. I want to communicate complex topics, systems or ideas to people and get their feedback. This is why the learnings from this course were crucial to my development.

The most valuable learning was to pick up weak signals of futures in the now. In future projects, I want to imagine those preposterous futures to understand humans & non-humans in different situations. I aim to bring people from different backgrounds together to create inventions, so I can be a designer that thinks about the consequences and impact the designed "things" will have. I want to apply the scenario based discussions more in my designs because they will be useful when I am starting to understand a new design space.

[1] Thomas P. Hughes. 2004. Human-built world: How to think about technology and culture. University of Chicago Press.
[2] Egbert Schuurman. 1997. Philosophical and ethical problems of technicism and genetic engineering. Society for Philosophy and Technology Quarterly Electronic Journal 3, 1: 27–44.
[3] Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti. 1999. Cultural probes. interactions. Volume 6: 21–29.
[4] Paul Graham Raven. 2017. Telling tomorrows: Science fiction as an energy futures research tool. Energy Research & Social Science 31: 164–169. Retrieved June 28, 2022 from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.034
[5] John Urry. 2016. What is the future? John Wiley & Sons.
[6] Kuijzer Lenneke. N.d. Let's reporta future practice: Interview roleplay as a way to flesh out alternatives. Retrieved June 28, 2022 from https://canvas.tue.nl/courses/18740/files?preview=4045827